

A Poem on the Underground Wall by MonsterSquad

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Summary: El and Mike spend a day in New York City and El learns that even apparently ugly things can be beautiful.

A Poem on the Underground Wall

The city buzzed with life and sounds as El Hopper and Mike Wheeler walked hand and hand down the sidewalk. They were visiting New York City with Mike's family and while they were only 17 years old, Mike had talked his parents into giving them an entire day all to themselves so he could entertain her and make memories with her and they could have an adventure that had nothing to do with the Upside Down.

Mike also wanted to see everything through *her* eyes and he had almost given away the surprise on more than one occasion.

But now they were walking through Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village and Mike couldn't stop thinking about how it would be if this was their life; just the two of them, exploring the streets, living their life to the city's heartbeat.

El had been wonderstruck at it all, the scale of things. She noticed the little things too, namely the graffiti in the subway station.

"El, it's called graffiti but really it's vandalism. I guess some people can't ignore a blank canvas," Mike said when she asked. El found the drawings to be fascinating. The idea that someone could be brazen enough to paint or write on the wall of a public place was compelling. El thought they must really have something they needed to say.

They had been waiting on the subway train in the Village. Mike wouldn't tell her where they were going. As they stood on the platform El spotted a somewhat tattered and dog-eared book on the floor. As she went to pick it up, Mike tried to hold her back.

"El, you don't know where that's been. It probably smells like piss because it's probably been pissed on by who knows how many people," Mike explained even as she held the book in her hands.

El carefully sniffed the edges. "It doesn't smell like anything. Why would anyone pee on a book anyway?"

Mike shrugged. "I don't know. Won't you just leave it though? We'll find some place to wash our hands."

But then their subway train arrived and Mike forgot about the book as they hurried to find seats. It was a few minutes later when he noticed that El was still holding the book. She was actually *reading* it.

"Ugh, you still have it. Well, I guess it can't hurt more now. We still need to wash our hands when we can. So what book is it?"

El showed him the book.

"El, this book is about slavery. Or at least this poem is." Even as he was saying it Mike could see the confused look on El's face and knew that her confusion didn't stem from not knowing what slavery was but from him not understanding how she could relate to it. Mike felt like a heel. "You know what? I think it's a good poem for you to read. I mean, I'm sure you can identify with a lot of it. And Maya Angelou is a good writer. Maybe it's fate that you found that book."

For the rest of the day El would read passages from the poem to Mike. As they stood in line at the Empire State Building El was reading. Already the day was growing long and Mike hoped they'd have time to see the city from the top of it at twilight and still have time to make the train to midtown because he had tickets for them to see *A Chorus Line* and he didn't want El to miss it. He'd been torn between shows, trying to decide between *Cats*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Les Misérables*. In the end he decided on the one that had nice music and wasn't heavy in terms of themes. He was looking forward to seeing El's face light up as she watched the show.

But first he wanted her to see the city lights from above. They reached the top of the building and El gasped audibly.

"Wow, it's so beautiful," she whispered as they looked out across the city. What she said next surprised Mike, as she had only found her book a few hours earlier and they had been walking and seeing sights for most of the day.

"Just like moons and like suns,

*With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise"*

Mike gawked at her. "You memorized it already?"

El shrugged. "I like it. It speaks to me. This is really pretty, Mike. Thank you for bringing me here."

Mike slipped his hand into hers. "This is just one thing we're doing tonight. Come on, we're actually headed to another place. I think you'll like it."

After snapping a couple of pictures of themselves on the top of the Empire State Building they once again had to take the subway to their next destination. Time was slipping away and Mike was worried that they wouldn't make it on foot.

El was still interested in the graffiti that adorned the walls of the subway station.

"Mike, are these poets too? The ones who wrote these words?"

Mike followed her gaze. He tried to see if from her angle.

"Well, I never thought of it like that. But I guess you could say they are. I mean, well, like your book. I'm sure whoever wrote this stuff had logic behind it, or at least a reason for doing it."

El looked around. Even the curse words seemed poetic in their flagrant styles. Some were angry looking, some cartoonish, some were small and some were large. All seemed to evoke a sense of redemption. Their authors could come and go but the words on the walls apparently lingered for what seemed like an eternity.

"So poetry is all around us?" El asked, her eyes seeking answers from the only person who had ever really answered her honestly.

Mike studied his girlfriend. Even in the setting of a dirty, graffiti riddled subway station she seemed to attract the only light in the

place and to Mike she looked angelic. He couldn't deny it. El was poetry in motion.

"You could definitely say that, El. How do you always see the good in everything?"

"I watch what *you* do," she answered, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

They made their way across Midtown to Shubert Theater and Mike surprised El with his tickets to *A Chorus Line*. She loved the songs and Mike had trouble watching the actual show because he kept looking at *El*. She was rapt with attention and she was smiling the whole time, holding his hand and squeezing during the songs she particularly liked. He could see a tear running down her cheek during *What I Did for Love*.

"Hey," Mike whispered, leaning over to her ear. "I love you, you know. And I don't regret what I did for love either." El put her head on his shoulder and Mike knew that she was happy, most likely putting herself into the song, and she didn't need to say anything back because the way she held his hand and leaned into him said everything for her.

After the show it was getting pretty late. Mike had told his parents they'd be back at the hotel before 1:00 a.m., wanting to give himself time in case they got lost or had to backtrack after missing the subway station. His mother had wanted them to only take taxis but Ted Wheeler deemed that too expensive and to Mike's surprise had been on board with them using the subway like real New Yorkers. They hadn't been mugged, or held at gunpoint (a main fear of his mother's), and they had done nothing but make lasting memories that they would both hold dear.

As they entered the subway for the final time that night they were both still feeling the energy from the show they'd seen.

"Still got your book?" Mike asked, though he knew that she did. She had stashed it in his backpack when they went into the theater.

"I know the whole poem now. I think it's my favorite," El answered.

The train was nowhere in sight and they seemed to be alone on the platform. It was much darker in the station than it had been earlier.

"Wanna make a memory? A *lasting* one?" El asked, a mischievous smile breaking across her face. Mike was on his knees rummaging through his backpack.

"What do you mean?" Mike inquired.

"Well, look around. Look at all of this *poetry*, I guess it could be considered. I want to leave my own. Do you have something I could write with?"

Mike started to point out how that was technically against the law, but then he realized that everything El had been through in her early life was *against the law* and he couldn't see how her writing on a subway wall that was already filled with some unspeakable art could hurt anything.

"Do you know what you wanna write? We'd have to be fast. Someone could come along and see. And the last train is due soon." Mike looked at his watch. "But we have time. It's only 11:30. We could always walk back if we miss the train."

El was visibly excited. She nodded quickly. Mike found a red crayon in his bag and handed it to her.

"Here's a crayon. Make your mark. I promise I'll never tell." Mike smiled, he couldn't help it, as he handed her the stick of red wax. She looked so childlike and happy and it made his heart ache, he loved her so much.

Just then they heard a noise and both quickly withdrew into the shadows. El could feel her excitement, the anticipation of what she was going to do fueling her.

They watched from the hidden location as a few people boarded the last train, watching as the doors opened for them and then closed, the train clicking silently down the tracks, a gently tapping litany, and El held her crayon rosary tight in her hand.

Soon they were all alone. Mike still thought they should be quick.

"Now's your chance, El. What do you want to say?"

El hesitated before she started to draw letters on the wall, the only light coming from a broken and flickering incandescent lamp and the exit sign. Her heart was in her throat. She could hear her pulse in her ears. With a shaky hand that became steadier with each word, she wrote, scrawling across the subway tiles.

"I'm going to say the part of the poem I like best. But not all of it. Just the part I'm never going to forget." She turned back to her work but Mike could hear her mumbling as she wrote.

*"You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise."*

When she was finished she was crying. Mike knew why. He held her in the subway station until she nodded that she was ready to leave. He looked over his shoulder at what she'd written just before they ascended the steps back up to the street, as though they were acting out her prose, both literally and figuratively. Mike knew that El was right.

Still I rise

Like angels taking flight they ascended the stairway to the Heaven that was the lights and sounds of the city, to the anonymity and the excitement. El walked with her head held high and her hand in Mike's. For even if her words were ever cleared away, with Mike at her side El knew that like air, still she'd rise.

A/N: This work follows canon time. Les Miserables is far too meta since a castmember was a main character in that show, and I really love A Chorus Line so I went with that. I think El would like the songs. If you read this, thanks so much for reading. I have a few other ideas but I happily leave them on the back burner and prioritize my main hobby. It's way more fun. But enough about that...

This work was inspired by something but I'll keep that inspiration to myself. I just thought it was a pretty El thing to do so I wrote the story.